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AUTHOR Stevenson, Robert L.; Greene, Mark T.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses three conceptual problems--point of view, unit of bias, and behavioral response--with using content analysis to study news bias. The paper shows that the point of view of the content analyst is not appropriate if one wants to see how news consumers define and react to bias, that the unit of bias should be the specific instance of bias rather than a generalized summary evaluation, and that individual behavior is a more appropriate element of news bias to study than the content itself. In an exploratory study of news bias that tried to cope with those problems, 73 undergraduates were asked to read favorable and unfavorable magazine and newspaper stories about the 1976 presidential candidates, to indicate where and why they paused in their readings of the stories, and to report both their political attitudes and their evaluations of the content of the news stories. Results indicate that what news consumers see as news bias is often news that is discrepant with their existing ideas and unrelated to journalistic accuracy, completeness, or balance (Author/RL)

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A Reconsideration of Bias in the News

Robert L. Stevenson
Mark T. Greene

School of Journalism
University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

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Robert L. Stevenson
Mark T. Greene

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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A discussion of news bias brings to mind the famous comment by Justice Stewart who said that while hard-core pornography may be undefinable, "I know it when I see it."[1] A good many people have trouble defining bias as well, but that does not stop them from finding it with distressing frequency in their newspapers, magazines, radio and television news.

The research studying news bias runs into the problem of defining the term. People use "bias" to describe several different conditions. The journalist, like the sinner, can be called to account for what he has done and what he has failed to do.

A reporter who leaves out important parts of the story (or ignores the story entirely) can be accused of bias. Reporters can also be charged with bias for what they do report. The reporting can be inaccurate; it can also be unfair. The first definition usually deals with the problem of journalistic competence rather than bias, however. The definition of bias as unfair or unbalanced coverage is behind most complaints of news coverage. Since journalistic codes of ethics in all media (and federal broadcast regulations as well) call for fair coverage, a charge of bias based on this definition cannot be dismissed lightly.

These approaches to the study of news bias focus on the relationship between the reporter and the news event — what he or she does or does not do in recording the event. But it is also true that in most circumstances news consumers — the readers, viewers and listeners — come to the media with prior experience with the event and from that experience some expectation of what will be (or should be) reported. In this paper, we argue that focusing on this link between the news consumer and the event — what he or she sees as bias — is a more productive approach to the study of news bias than further studies of journalistic performance which have failed to demonstrate systematic bias but which at the same time also have failed to convince the general public of the lack of bias by the reporter.

Are News Media Biased?

The ambiguity of the term "bias is shown in two national surveys which looked at the question of news bias. In the first study, the question confounds the definition by including three different conditions: completeness of coverage, accuracy of coverage and fairness of coverage. The second survey asks separately about news accuracy and news fairness. It highlights the problem of using fairness as a criterion of bias because the public, while agreeing that newspapers often favor one end of the political spectrum, disagrees on which end gets the favorable treatment.

A nationwide survey in 1974 asked, "And how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media — such as newspapers, TV, and radio in general — when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?" One-fifth of the respondents (20%) said they had a great deal of confidence, half (48%) said they had a fair amount, one-fifth (22%) said not very much, and 8% had none at all. Two per cent did not respond.[2]

A 1973 Gallup study asked a number of specific questions about the public's views of the news media, including bias:[3]

"Newspapers are not careful about getting their facts straight."

Definitely agree - 26%; partly agree - 41%; partly disagree - 21%; Definitely disagree - 9%; no answer - 3%.

"In general, how would you rate the job done by newspapers you read in presenting both sides of controversial issues...?"

Excellent - 8%; good - 41%; only fair - 39%; poor - 9%; no answer - 3%.

"Newspapers stress the news that favors the liberal side."

Definitely agree - 12%; partly agree - 34%; partly disagree - 33%; definitely disagree - 12%; no answer - 8%.

"Newspapers stress the news that favors the conservative side."

Definitely agree - 5%; partly agree - 29%; partly disagree - 41%; definitely disagree - 15%; no answer - 10%.

This persistent criticism of the news media flourished in the Nixon Administration. Supporting well-known critics like Vice President Agnew and Clay Whitehead, head of the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, were several books which assembled anecdotal evidence to argue that most reporters were unfairly critical of Nixon and his conservative policies.[4] Journalists, of course, defended themselves by pointing out that similar criticism had been leveled against them by Democratic administrations to which they were alleged to be more sympathetic.

Anecdotal arguments about news bias are never fully persuasive. What someone inside the administration sees as hostile and unfair coverage may be the result of incompetent reporting, incomplete information or deadline pressure. Or it may simply reflect a different perspective on the issue at hand.

One way to overcome the weakness of anecdotal argument is to adopt the rigorous methodology of content analysis. With carefully selected random samples of content, explicit rules of categorization and tests of coder reliability, it is argued, it is possible to evaluate news coverage from a more objective, scientific perspective. Such studies, of course, continue to be a staple of communications research and flourish after every major election.[5]

It is difficult to summarize more than two decades of quantitative content analysis of news bias into one simple statement, but there seems to be very little evidence in the studies reported in the research journals of any large-scale, systematic favoring of one political party or candidate

over the other in the last couple of decades. The studies which purport to demonstrate conclusively the existence of news bias — such as Efron's book about the 1968 presidential campaign[6] — usually turn out to have some fatal methodological flaw.[7] In contrast, what most of these studies conclude is that media treatment of different parties or candidates or issues is frequently superficial and uninformed but seldom systematically slanted toward one contender or one point of view.[8]

The latest large-scale content analysis of television coverage of a presidential election, which involves a massively detailed analysis of all network coverage of the 1972 campaign, concludes:[9]

> Differences in network coverage of candidates, parties, and issues were too muted to provide a basis for allegations of either political or structural bias. Differences among the networks were slight when they occurred in systematic ways. Most coverage was neutral or ambiguous rather than favorable or unfavorable. One party's advantages were generally offset by the other's in selected aspects of news programming. Although structural and situational biases existed on all three networks, perhaps favoring the Democrats more than the Republicans, these biases generally reflected the sheer quantity of coverage, <u>not</u> evaluative aspects of the coverage.

In our understanding of news bias, we are not much beyond the 1950s when researchers began measuring newspaper columns. And while the bulk of this body of research over this long period argues against any systematic bias in the news, it apparently has failed to convince either the political leadership of the country or a good part of the public.

Defining and Measuring Bias

Most quantitative studies of news bias have used one of two definitions. The less-used definition is that bias is departure from truth: if the reporter misquotes a candidate or misstates his position, then the reporter is guilty of biasing his story. This approach can be used in limited

situations where some record of the event is available to compare with the reporter's story — a recording or transcript of the event, for example, although some "official" transcripts, such as the Congressional Record, are often inaccurate or blatant revisions of the original text.

Some studies of media accuracy have consisted of sending copies of stories to the news source with instructions to critique the material. Some newspapers do this routinely, and the technique has been used in several studies of the accuracy of science reporting.[10] It has the advantage of detecting errors of omission as well as commission. And indeed the most frequent error in science writing — and quite likely other news writing as well — is the omission of important details or qualifications.

Inaccurate or incomplete reporting, however, is more often a problem of journalistic incompetence rather than journalistic bias. Another problem is that statements which are factually correct in a narrow sense can still be distorted. In all of the furor created by CBS' "The Selling of the Pentagon," only one serious factual error was detected — the editing of two sentences into one in a way, critics claimed, that seriously distorted the speaker's views. But even though the documentary was almost totally "factually" accurate, it was, in the view of the hundreds of people who complained to the network and the Congress, seriously biased.[11]

Bias-as-inaccuracy is not a very useful working definition of bias for the reasons just noted. A more workable definition — and one that has been adopted for most serious studies of news bias — is that bias is the systematic differential treatment of one candidate, one party, one side of an issue over an extended period of time. This approach has the advantage of being embedded in broadcast regulations and the codes of ethics of professional journalistic organizations. Bias is the failure to treat all voices in the marketplace of ideas equally.

Content analysis can be used to evaluate the amount and kind of coverage given to each contender. This methodology, as noted above, is the one used in most serious studies of news bias. And most of the studies indicate that most media do treat most candidates, parties and sides of the issues fairly most of the time. The differences that emerge in any one campaign or controversy usually can be attributed to the unique situation or that campaign or controversy. There is certainly no evidence of massive slanting of the news toward either end of the political spectrum.

A researcher who tries to develop a study based on these two definitions of news bias may encounter the dilemma that they can be inconsistent. News coverage of various candidates or sides of issues which reflects the differences in those candidates or arguments can be considered imbalanced. Media which treat candidates or issues differently can be accused of bias because they are not giving equal coverage to all voices in the marketplace. But if they do treat all contenders equally in terms of time or space and content, they can also be accused of distorting the differences that do exist. And by distorting the news, they are also guilty of bias.

After more than 20 years of studying news bias, we have not got very far. On the whole, most candidates, parties and sides of issues are treated about equally; most reports are reasonably accurate if often trivial. From this huge body of research, we can conclude that the media are not biased. Yet, as the poll figures indicate, a good part of the public remains convinced that the media are biased. And even more disconcerting is the finding that the journalist is often accused of favoring opposite ends of the political spectrum: almost as many respondents in the Gallup survey said the media favored the conservative side as said the media gave special favor to the liberals. The journalist is assured by the researcher

that the news is not biased, but at the same time, the pollster tells him that a large part of the public believes that the news is biased but disagrees on the direction of the bias.

A new look at news bias is in order.

Our purpose here is not to critique news coverage of political campaigns nor to comment on specific content analysis techniques that have been used to study bias in the coverage of those campaigns. Rather, we propose to raise three conceptual problems with content analysis studies of news bias and then to report an exploratory study of news bias that tries to deal adequately with these conceptual problems.

Conceptual Problems

1. Point of view. It is one of the enduring puzzles of human behavior that so many people insist that theirs is the only possible perspective from which to view a situation. In introductory communication classes, many students learn for the first time that others can see things quite differently. Here we are not referring to selective perception in any physiological sense but to the variety of ways people can construct the mental pictures that constitute their psychological reality. What is even more puzzling is how few behavioral researchers take point of view into account when studying human behavior.

In his brilliant series "The Ascent of Man," Bronowski takes us on the streetcar that Einstein rode to his job in the Swiss patent office in Bern in 1905.[12] What if the car moved faster and faster until it became like a beam of light?, Bronowski asks, repeating the "innocent" question that produced the principle of relativity. A similar innocent question in

the 16th century led Copernicus to wonder what the universe would look like if he were standing on the sun instead of the earth. His answer led him to reject the Ptolemaic solar system in favor of a new conceptualization which made the earth part of the system but no longer its center.

Einstein's principle of relativity ended for all time the idea of a truly "objective" way of observing, a God's eye point of view, and instead, made even such elementary concepts as space and time relative to the observer. In the Einsteinian world, an observation includes both what is observed and the observer. Time and space exist only as they are observed by someone at some point in time and from some point in space and have meaning not as absolute quantities but relative to other observations at other points in time from other points in space.

The implications of this for social science is that there is no single way of observing a social phenomenon such as news bias, only different ways, none of which is intrinsically better than any other. Social researchers sometimes recognize the possibility of alternate points of view by talking about subjects' "perceived" bias or liberalism or authoritarianism, or whatever. But frequently this is accompanied by a hint of condescension as though the subject is less competent than the researcher to observe these phenomena.

In most studies of news bias, the perspective is that of a carefully trained, neutral observer whose observations are governed by a fully elaborated set of rules. Coder reliability checks test the ability of other observers to make the same observations. Reliability of observation, of course, is a requirement for research, but the perspective of an impartial observer may not be the appropriate point of view to use in studies of news bias. News consumers — readers, viewers and listeners — respond to

issues like news bias from the perspective of what they see and hear and read, not the arbitrary and often artificial point of view of a researcher. If the news media and journalism researchers have failed to persuade the public that news for the most part is not biased, it may be that our studies are not necessarily badly done or that we lack "credibility," but rather only that we have failed to convince them that our perspective is preferable to theirs. They are probably right.

2. Unit of bias. Most studies of bias in the news measure bias over a relatively long period of time. Studies of political campaigns usually are based on coverage of the entire campaign. Bias studies outside of campaigns generally are based on samples of news content that are taken to represent some undefined but extended unit of time. Most bias studies look at bias in general, much as the attitudinal approach to behavior from which they are derived looks at behavior in general and assumes that behavior is a function of certain underlying values or attitudes that make certain behaviors consistent across situations.

The problem with this approach is that we do not behave in general; we behave in particular, in response to specific situations as we define them from our unique perspective. It is doubtful that very many television viewers or newspaper readers maintain a mental running tally of total minutes or inches for and against each candidate or party to evaluate media performance in general. Instead, people respond to specific things they see or read. They recognize and respond to specific instances of bias which might be a word, a phrase or an entire story.

As Carter points out,[13] behavior is not an undifferentiated continuum in which change is evolutionary but rather a sequence of specific behaviors in which we stop doing one thing in order to begin doing something else. If we ignore these units of behavior or try to sum across them to achieve a

greater level of generality — as is the case in cross-situational attitudinal evaluations — we miss most of the behavior we want to observe. When we impose an arbitrary unit such as an entire campaign or news coverage in general, we can miss most of what news consumers see as bias because they may be responding to their television newscasts or newspapers on the basis of quite different units. When we ask our respondents or subjects to evaluate news bias in general, we may be forcing them to adopt a unit they themselves do not use.

3. Behavioral response. Most of the studies that focus on the public's perception of bias treat the concept as a generalized attitudinal dimension. The Gallup Poll cited earlier asked respondents to react to statements about favorable newspaper treatment to conservative and liberal news on the basis of an interval scale which ranged from definitely agree to definitely disagree. This approach does not allow us to get at the specific cognitive behavior of a person as he encounters what he sees as an instance of bias. If our goal is eventually to understand how communication takes place, we must begin by trying to observe directly the phenomenon which is the focus of our interest.

This, of course, is the old problem of what goes on inside the black box of the mind. Most researchers have given up trying to open up the box. They are content to observe what goes in — and in the case of experimental design, to manipulate it — and what comes out. What is missing is any observation of what goes on while the message is proceeding through the black box. We do not observe what happens; we observe the effect of what has happened.

A general problem of behavioral science is a lack of an observational technique which allows the researcher to observe cognitive behavior itself

rather than only the result of cognitive behavior. Carter's signaled stopping technique (SST)[14] however, allows us to observe this behavior indirectly by training a subject to leave us a trace of that behavior. As noted earlier, cognitive behavior is not an undifferentiated continuum but rather a sequence of discrete units with definite starting and stopping points: one does one thing, then stops doing that and begins doing something else. A subject using the SST is instructed to indicate each point in the message where he stops (usually shown by a slash) and the reason for stopping at each point. The subject is given a set of conventions to indicate reasons for stopping — to think, to reread, to question, to agree, to disagree — and also is told to indicate any other reason by a comment in the margin.

It is important to distinguish between the act of stopping itself and the reason for stopping. The former is the communication act itself, the interruption of one behavior in order to initiate another behavior. The latter is the content of communication, what the individual is doing in the intervals of time between stops. Thus, by observing stopping, we can observe communication. Difference in stopping in various kinds of written material can be considered evidence of differences in communication behavior. By observing the reasons for stopping in these different situations, we observe differences in the content of the communication as well.

Carter suggests that two conditions which can produce an interruption of cognitive activity are a cognitive discrepancy and a loss of singularity. Both represent interruptions in information flow, but they derive from quite different conditions. A cognitive discrepancy results when incoming information conflicts with some criterion of evaluation such as the cognitions the individual already holds about the situation described by the

message. If an individual reads something about a political candidate which conflicts with what he already knows — or believes to be true — about the candidate, then the incoming information establishes a cognitive discrepancy which is likely to lead to a stop.

A loss of singularity, in contrast, represents an interruption in the construction of an idea. An individual can fail to get the message because the message contains multiple implications or because it contains no implications at all. It is something like the situation of an individual following road signs to a distant city. If he comes to a fork in the road and finds a sign to his destination pointing in both directions or finds no road sign at all, he has lost the singularity of information. In either case, the loss of singularity — the loss of unambiguous direction — is likely to produce a stop, just as the situations at the fork on the road are likely to produce a physical interruption of the journey.

These two stop-producing situations — cognitive discrepancy and loss of singularity — tend to produce different communication as well, that is, different reasons for stopping. Stops in cognitively discrepant information often are made to resolve the discrepancy: to question the information, to disagree with it. In contrast, stops produced by a loss of singularity frequently reflect the individual's efforts to get back the point of the message — stops to reread, stops to think.

This extended discussion of stopping is important as the basis for a reconsideration of news bias.

Reconsideration of News Bias

We suggest that what news consumers often see as bias in the news are cognitive discrepancies between what the news tells them about the political

world around them and what they already believe about that world. David Brinkley has said that no politician ever complains that the news is biased in his favor. That idea could be extended to the public as a whole; journalists seldom hear complaints from the public that the news is biased in favor of what the public believes. The Gallup survey does not break down the perceptions of news bias by political affiliation of the respondent, but one can imagine quite easily that Republicans tend to believe the news favors the Democrats and vice versa. None of the members of the Nixon Administration accused the Washington press corps of treatment unfairly favoring the Republicans. If Republicans tend to see the news as biased in favor of the Democrats and vice versa, then what the Gallup respondents are talking about is the discrepancy between what they already believe about the world of politics and what the news media are telling them about that world.

If we want to understand what the consumers of news see as bias, then we should let them define it. We hypothesize that most people define as bias in the news information which is descrepant with the mental picture they already hold about the situation. If so, then differences in cognitive behavior should be apparent if we adopt a methodology that allows us to observe these differences and which overcomes the other conceptual problems discussed above.

Our reconsideration of bias in the news tries to deal with the problems discussed here by incorporating these considerations:

1. Bias will be observed from the point of view of the consumer of news. Bias is defined quite simply as whatever participants in the study say is bias.

2. The unit of bias will also be determined by the consumer of news.

Participants will identify each specific instance of bias they find in a sample of news.

3. As observers, we will not try to measure a generalized evaluation of the level of the bias in the news over an extended period of time but rather will focus on specific cognitive behavior as participants work their way through what they see as specific instances of biased and unbiased news.

Method

This approach to news bias was tested in a small study of news coverage of the 1976 presidential campaign. Eight news stories were purposefully selected, four from Time magazine and four from the New York Times. For each medium, we selected one story that generally was favorable to Jimmy Carter and one that was generally unfavorable to him, one story that was generally favorable to Gerald Ford and one that was generally unfavorable. As much of each story as would fit was typed on a single doublespaced page, usually 25 or 26 typewritten lines. The stories were systematically varied in each test booklet.

Subjects were 73 undergraduates enrolled in introductory speech classes at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The data were collected during a regular class period in February, 1977.

On the first page of the booklet were instructions on the use of the Signaled Stopping Technique. The instructions were:

> One disadvantage of television news is that we cannot interrupt. We cannot say, "Just a minute, Mr. Cronkite, I disagree with what you just said." We cannot tell David Brinkley, "Hold on there, David, I didn't understand what you said. Please repeat it for me."

When reading news — rather than watching it on television or listening to it on the radio — we can interrupt ourselves. We can stop reading to think or to reread. We can stop to form some opinion of what we have just read.

On the following pages are eight news stories. Read each story and stop whenever you like. Each time that you do stop, indicate where you stopped by marking a slash.(/). You might want to stop to ask a question, to say something, to think, to reread, or to do something else. In each case, indicate the reason for stopping. You can use the following conventions:

/T Stop to think
/A Stop to agree
/? Stop to question
/R Stop to reread
/D Stop to disagree

If you have some other reason for stopping, report it in the margin. If you want to give additional emphasis, you can show it this way:

/?? Really question that
/AA Agree very much

At this point, no indication was given that the study involved bias. Part two of the questionnaire — completed after the stopping exercise was done — asked subjects to indicate their interest in the campaign on a seven-point scale ranging from very interested to not at all interested. A second question asked whom they had supported in the presidential campaign. Alternatives were Ford, Carter, Other and None.

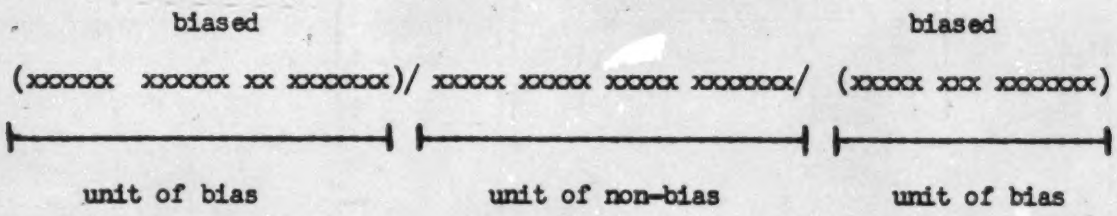
The last part of the questionnaire introduced the topic of news bias. Subjects were given these instructions:

One of the major problems of news coverage of political campaigns is that the news is sometimes <u>biased</u> in one way or another. Go back over the eight news stories you have just read and draw circles around the specific parts of stories that you see as instances of <u>news bias</u>. The biased part may be a single word, a specific phrase or sentence, a paragraph or two, or an entire story.

It is not necessary to indicate why you think each passage is biased. It is important, however, to show exactly where each instance of bias begins and ends.

Finally, as a comparison, subjects were asked to rate each story for bias on a seven-point scale whose extremes were defined as very biased and not at all biased. Subjects took most of a 50-minute class period to complete the exercise.

The questionnaires were coded first by counting the total number of lines marked as biased and non-biased in each story to the nearest half line and the number and kind of stops in each type on content. With one exception, when the unit of bias or non-bias extended less than a quarter of a line, it was not counted; units from one-quarter to three-quarters of a line were counted as a half line; units of more than three-quarters of a line were counted as a full line. The exception was that units of bias whose total length was less than a quarter-line — an occasional single word or short phrase — were counted as a minimum half line. Stops at the end of a unit were counted as part of that unit. In the example below, the first stop is counted as part of the first unit of bias; the second stop is considered part of the unit of non-bias:



Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the mean number of stops per line of biased news and non-biased news. At first glance, the numbers look small, but this is a function of the unit of measurement. In fact, the frequency of stopping

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Table 1 About Here

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in biased news is almost exactly one and one half times as great as in the non-biased news. The difference is significant at the .01 level by t-test (one-tailed).

The difference is consistent with our hypothesis that people see as biased news information which is descrepant with the cognitions they already have about the situation described in the news story. People do behave differently when they encounter what they see as biased news: they interrupt more frequently. This is behavior which is characteristic of an individual who is dealing with information which is inconsistent with the picture of the situation he already holds in his head.

In Table 2, the differences in the content of communication in biased and non-biased news are indicated. With one exception, these differences, too, support the hypothesis of news bias as a cognitive discrepancy. The

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Table 2 About Here

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exception is that a greater proportion of the stops to agree were recorded in biased news than in the non-biased news. Perhaps Brinkley was wrong: people may not complain that the news is biased in their favor, but they may recognize that some of the statements in the news with which they stop to agree are the kinds of value judgments objective newswriting ought to exclude.

However, the relationship between attitude and behavior which the consistency theories predict is at best temuous. Festinger[15] concluded some years ago that the presumed consistent relationship between attitude and behavior — here represented by stops to disagree in what the subject has defined as biased news — frequently does not exist at all and that sometimes the opposite relationship is found.

Allen[16] has distinguished between attitude change and attitude-evocation, which is defined as an indication of an affective response — either positive or negative — to a particular message element. Attitude-evocation comes prior to attitude change: an attitude must be produced before it can be influenced. Attitude-evoking behavior is consistent with Festinger's comment and is demonstrated here. Bias rouses people to an affective response even though the response is not necessarily in a single direction.

The other stops are consistent with the hypothesis and suggest markedly different communication content. In the biased news content, stops were made more frequently to question and to disagree. This is clearly communication content which is typically associated with cognitive discrepancies. In the non-biased news, in contrast, stops to reread and to think were more frequent. This is communication content associated with the loss of singularity, the losing of one's way while constructing the mental picture of what the message is getting across.

What do these differences tell us about bias in the news? They tell us first of all that cognitive behavior differs when people encounter what they see as bias. The flow of information is interrupted more frequently as people encounter cognitive discrepancies. Beyond that, they tell us what people do differently when they encounter bias. People deal with these cognitive interruptions differently by questioning more frequently and by responding affectively as well.

In non-biased material, the interruptions, in contrast, are less frequent. Information processing goes on more smoothly. And when interruptions do occur, they are more frequently the result of the loss of the point of the message, not a rejection of it.

The variety of behavior our subjects recorded in this exercise is indicative of the range of ways people can respond to something like news bias. The amount of bias they marked covered the full possible range: some subjects found no bias at all in the eight stories; others considered the entire 202 lines as biased. The mean was 29 lines of bias with a standard deviation of 30. The lines of bias in each of the eight stories were modestly correlated with overall impressions of the level of bias in each story. For the eight stories, the Pearson correlations between lines of bias marked and degree of bias measured by the seven-point scale ranged from .30 to .55.

We also looked at the influence of three factors on the total number lines of perceived bias. As Table 3 shows, only one of the factors — medium — was significantly related to the total lines of bias. Not

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Table 3 About Here

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suprisingly, more lines of bias were found in Time magazine with its highly interpretive, "subjective" style than in the more traditional and reserved New York Times. Neither of the other factors — subjects' preferred candidate or what we classified as positive or negative direction of the stories — was a significant factor in determining the total lines of bias. More than anything else, this seems to suggest the danger of trying to decide as an "objective" observer what is positive or negative coverage of a political candidate.

Several limitations of the signaled stopping technique and of this study should be noted. The technique obviously is intrusive. The participant must be trained to be aware of his own behavior and, of course, may modify his behavior as a result. For that reason, the technique is more appropriate

for experimental designs where the intrusion of measurement applies equally to all experimental conditions. Our design is quasi-experimental in that the two conditions — biased and non-biased news — were determined by the respondent rather than manipulated by the researcher. But that determination was made separately from the stopping exercise which was completed before the concept of bias was introduced. It remains a possibility, however, that some of the participants caught on to the link between stopping and bias and marked their sections of bias accordingly.

In any study based on availability samples, the threat to external validity is a problem. It is likely that undergraduates would be more sensitive than the general population to the problems of reporting and to their own "biases" of perception. But it is not clear how — or whether — this would influence their cognitive behavior in what they perceived as biased and non-biased news. On the whole, it seems likely that the differences observed in this study would be greater in a study involving participants who were more representative of the general population.

Conclusion

Journalists have often thrown up their hands in despair when confronted by angry readers and viewers who simultaneously charge the media with bias toward both ends of the political spectrum. Many professional journalists have argued — and their argument is supported here — that bias, like beauty, is more in the eye of the beholder than in the fairness or accuracy of the news columns or newscasts.

But does this mean that journalists ought not to be concerned with questions like accuracy or fairness of the news? We regard these as important

professional questions. As journalists, we accept the premise that news coverage ought to be fair and ought to be accurate. But these are professional standards which have very little to do with bias.

It is possible that certain techniques of reporting and writing could reduce what the public sees as bias. It is also possible that news consumers could be educated to understand more clearly the difference between the message and the messenger and not to attribute to media bias the discrepancies between responsible news coverage and their own perceptions of what the situation is or should be.

The problem of news bias is important to journalists and to the political system in which journalism plays such an important part. But the problem is not likely to be solved if we continue the traditional but unproductive approach of content analysis of news coverage. Instead, we should think of accuracy, completeness and fairness as matters of professional concern. And we should think of bias as part of the news consumers' response to the news, a response that may or may not be influenced by the professional competence of the journalist or the quality of his product.

Table 1: Mean stops per line of biased and non-biased news.

Biased News	Non-biased News
.1465	.1037

t=2.88, df=72, p=.005

Table 2: Reasons for stopping in biased and non-biased news.

	Biased News n=372	Non-biased News n=1316
Stops to:		
Think	13.4%	17.1%
Agree	23.9	18.1
Reread	16.9	32.1
Disagree	17.7	11.0
Question	25.0	18.9
Other	2.9	2.7

Table 3: Total lines of bias by subject of story, medium and candidate preference.

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Significance of F
Main effects	8.787	3	2.929	10.006	.001
Subject of story	0.995	1	0.995	3.398	.062
Medium	7.391	1	7.391	25.252	.001
Candidate preference	0.401	1	0.401	1.369	.241
Two-way interactions	0.339	3	0.113	0.386	.999
Subject by medium	0.251	1	0.251	0.856	.999
Subject by candidate preference	0.060	1	0.060	0.204	.999
Medium by candidate preference	0.029	1	0.029	0.098	.999
Three-way interaction	0.052	1	0.052	0.177	.999
Subject by medium by candidate preference	0.052	1	0.052	0.177	.999

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